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PERSPECTIVES IN LEARNING

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Equine Assisted Therapy

*By Kristie Luckett
and Cindy Witsell*

Equine Assisted Therapy (EAP) is a unique, intensive, short-term approach to helping individuals with various mental health concerns. This article will explain what EAP is, what is needed in order to conduct an EAP therapy session, provide a case study to demonstrate how EAP has been and can be utilized in practice, and finally, list the strengths of EAP. The information contained in this article is based on information provided by a therapist experienced in utilizing Equine Assisted Therapy.

Equine Assisted Therapy: More than just a "Horse" and Pony Show

Equine assisted therapy is often misunderstood to be conducting a counseling or therapy session while riding on horseback. EAP is not a riding program. As a matter of fact, almost all sessions are conducted with the majority of clients never even getting on the horse. Rather, clients participate in activities that are specifically designed for their individual needs. The ability of the client to control, or handle a horse is not the purpose of this therapy. The interaction between the client and the horse is the focus of this therapy. Through the interaction with the horse(s), clients are encouraged to engage in a safe and healthy relationship. In the relationships developed with the horses, clients are able to learn about themselves, are taught effective life coping skills, and learn appropriate self-assertion and responsibility. Currently, EAP is being used for the treatment of issues such as: parenting, relationship and family issues, communication deficits, abuse victims, low self-esteem, substance abuse, to name a few.

EAP: A Team Approach

Equine Assisted Therapy is an experiential team approach to mental health counseling. The team needed to do EAP consists of a licensed mental health professional, a professional horseperson, a horse(s), and a client(s). The mental health professional facilitates and processes the sessions with the client(s).

Case Study

"Kim", a 25 year old female, presented with several issues, such as letting people take advantage of her and making decisions. Kim had been in therapy for these issues in the past, but had not been able to change these behaviors. Kim's therapist offered EAP as a different way of working on these issues. Kim stated she would like to try a "different type of therapy."

In Kim's initial session, she was taught by the horse trainer the "do's and don'ts" of being around a horse. Kim was a bit skeptical since she had little knowledge of horses, but again agreed to give EAP a try.

After Kim's introduction to horse etiquette, Kim was escorted to the

corral where the horses were roaming freely. Kim was next asked by her therapist to choose a horse from the three available in the corral, to approach the horse of her choice, attach the lead, and bring the horse back to her initial starting point. What follows is a brief summary of the session that followed:

Kim- "I don't know which one to pick. I don't want a jumpy or mean horse. Which one should I choose?"

Therapist- "It is up to you which horse you choose. Are you afraid to make the decision yourself?"

Kim- "Yes, I do not want to make the wrong choice. I want to pick a horse that won't run from me."

Therapist- "Do you think that all choices you make are wrong or bad choices?"

Kim- "No, I just like to get different opinions. At times I think that my opinions or decisions are not as good as other peoples. I think I will try and get the brown spotted horse."

Kim approached the horse. The horse backed away a little, but let Kim put the lead on it and walked it over to Kim's original starting point.

Therapist- "How did you feel about making the decision on your own?"

Kim- "It felt good. I was a little scared that I was making the wrong choice."

Therapist- "What would you have done if you had chosen a horse that was mean or jumpy, as you called it?"

Kim- "I would have chosen another horse."

Therapist- "So, what I hear you saying is, yes, you might have chosen wrong, but you also knew that you had the control to make the situation turn out differently."

There are several ways to further process the activity Kim's therapist asked her to complete. The therapist could have asked Kim why she chose the horse she did.

Choosing a particular horse can tell the therapist a lot about how Kim chooses her friends. Kim made the comment earlier in the session that she does not want a "mean or jumpy horse." The therapist could explore with Kim the reason she feels she can't handle different personality types, or the reason she chooses to associate herself with certain personality types.

The therapist in the case study may have further explored with Kim issues surrounding her thinking that her opinions/decisions are not valued. It could be that Kim herself does not value her own opinion, or that she has low self-esteem. Having Kim choose her own horse and helping her to make her own decisions empowered Kim to believe in herself and take the initiative to change the behaviors she no longer finds useful.

The Strengths of EAP

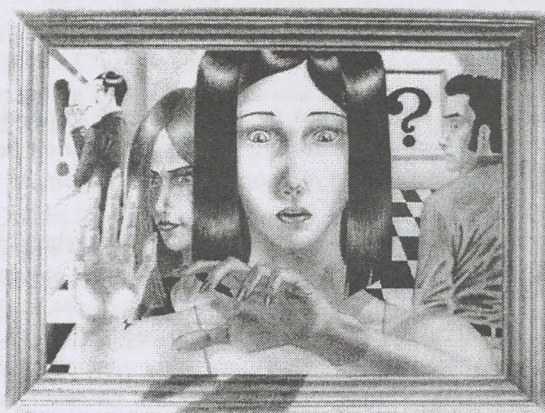
Equine assisted therapy is a useful strategy to working with clients as its' strengths include:

- EAP actively involves the client in the session.
- EAP allows the therapist to not only hear, but to actually "see" how the client reacts and interacts in certain situations.
- EAP is brief.

- EAP is in the “here and now.”
- EAP can be adjusted to meet the needs of the client(s).
- EAP is a team approach.
- EAP allows the therapist to identify the client’s issues quickly.
- EAP can be used for large groups.
- EAP enables and empowers the client.
- EAP does not require training or any horse knowledge.

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Ira Haraldson
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